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## Lewis P. Simpson: Memories and an Appreciation

AS A MEMBER OF AN NEH SUMMER SEMINAR AT LOUISIANA STATE University in 1979, I had been directed to arrive at Allen Hall on what by Louisiana standards turned out to be delightfully cool morning in early June. Loitering in the hallway near the seminar room, Lewis Simpson was dressed in his signature seersucker suit and natty bowtie. In a quiet, friendly, though hardly effusive voice, he greeted each member of the seminar as he or she arrived. That act of standing and waiting in the hallway, and taking the time to speak with us as individuals, told me a lot about Lewis P. Simpson. It was clear that he had done his homework, for in most cases he knew more about us than we did about him. That scrupulous concern with detail was, of course, a reflection of a lifetime of disciplined work as a famed scholar and editor, but it was also evidence of something more fundamental in his character: quite simply, a concern with human beings and a commitment to making the world a better place, not in the self-important terms of the social reformer but in more immediate and pragmatic ways. As I got to know him during the course of the seminar, through future meetings and contacts, and by reading his works with more attention, the fundamental sense of Lewis Simpson as a modest, somewhat shy, yet fiercely committed human being stayed with me.

I was fortunate to have met Lewis P. Simpson, the foremost scholar of Southern studies, early in my career. There was an endless amount that one could learn from him and by studying his work, but there was far more to learn from Lewis the person. For me, he became a model not just of scholarship but of a way to live. He gently corrected some of the more mischievous errors of my intellectual outlook—a bit more about this later—drawing me back toward a more humanistic viewpoint that placed ethical and spiritual concerns at the center of literary scholarship. By his example of humble service and his passion for the truth, he opened a door on the meaning and purpose of life. On that unseasonably cool morning in 1979, unfortunately the last such temperate morning of the summer, my life was transformed. Not immediately, of course, but

inexorably transformed from that of a callow and oblivious young man into a scholar of Southern letters who was at least committed to the study of something more than the less inspiring theories of literary structure and technique that had influenced my work in graduate school. For the first time, I believe, I was made aware of the real world of suffering and loss, of joy and triumph, that literature embodies and carries to the heart, if only we open our hearts.

Lewis Simpson was truly something special, but it was perhaps for this very reason that he was not always appreciated as he should have been. I have always felt that Lewis priced himself out of the market, so to speak, in terms of literary intelligence or, more precisely—to use a word not much in evidence today—in terms of wisdom. Unfortunately, among some his work was simply equated with an outdated school of criticism connected with those such as Tate, Warren, and Brooks who had been associated in various ways with *The Southern Review* and who, in fact, had exerted considerable influence on his criticism. What this view failed to take into account was the profound originality of Simpson's thought. In his reading of the "man of letters" in American literature, in studies not only of the literature of the South but of the North, in his complex relationship to a classical-Christian tradition that he felt had already suffered serious if not irreparable harm, and in his broader reading of the relationship of that tradition to modernity, Simpson exhibited a fierce intellectual independence. His critical positions were his own, not those of any school and certainly not slavishly indebted to any one critic, not even to Eric Voegelin, whom he much admired. To the charge that Simpson was simply irrelevant to what was taking place in the brave new world of poststructuralist theory, one can only throw up one's hands, for it was the majority of what was being done at that time that now seems irrelevant. Who now cares to go back and peruse the impenetrable volumes of deconstructive criticism that continued to be published well into the 1980s?

In contrast to the impenetrable theories in vogue at the time, Simpson's thought centered on only three critical terms: mind, history, and memory. In *The Dispossessed Garden*, the most succinct expression of his approach to Southern literature, Simpson traces the shifting figuration of the pastoral mode as a central element in the definition of Southern identity. The antebellum effort to enlist the pastoral mode was a prominent feature of the South's defense of slavery, and it required the

Southern writer to co-opt and revise European pastoral according to the circumstances of the Southern slave empire that was coming fully into existence. As Simpson points out in the case of Thomas Jefferson, the Southern writer attempted to portray the slave society "in terms of a pastoral garden of the chattel, seeking to make a covenant between the literary mind and chattel slavery, to make slavery the condition of the independent mind" (*Dispossessed Garden* 32–33). This effort failed, of course, but not before a historic period of defeat and dispossession had left the South bereft of cultural and economic vitality. Following a long and generally fruitless effort by Southern writers during the Reconstruction era and early modern period to defend the Southern past, a Southern renaissance arose in which, for the first time, Southern writers joined in the work of the modern literary clerisy to resist those forces of mechanization and abstraction that were at odds with an older civilization of myth and memory. As Simpson perceived, it was only at this point that Southern writers recognized the South's relationship to a crisis of belief that resulted from the displacement of a civilization of faith and tradition by a modern culture of the self. In William Faulkner's creation of his little "postage stamp" of Yoknapatawpha, all the tensions of this larger displacement are dramatized.

Like other members of the Southern renaissance, Faulkner understood that the antebellum South was not a heroic culture and that the Lost Cause was not really the defeat of a "cause" but the defeat of an overly ambitious capitalist enterprise based on agricultural mass production. Southerners were not fighting to preserve a graceful and cultured way of life, nor to protect the principle of "states' rights," but to protect a mechanized system of production based on the use of forced labor to acquire wealth that many in the South, including Jefferson, knew to be ill-gotten. The Old South was not the traditional society of pastoral myth that some in the Agrarian Movement imagined it to have been. Rather, as Faulkner understood, it was ruthlessly modern. Faulkner's salvation as a writer was his ability to perceive the Southern past with detachment and irony, though also with understanding and empathy. As Simpson wrote, the great achievement of the renaissance came about as Southern writers "became sufficiently aware that the South is a part of the apocalypse of modern civilization," the destructive force of a "machine which operates completely on the principle of endless consumption, and is in fact consuming the world" (*Man of Letters* 226).

As this brief synopsis indicates, Lewis Simpson's reading of Southern literature was rooted in a comprehensive interpretation of American history, and indeed of Western history from biblical times to the present. His studies of Southern and New England literature were firmly grounded in a coherent understanding of a culture that began with British settlement in Roanoke and Jamestown in the South and in the Plymouth Colony in the North and that evolved in quite different ways. The original Puritan sense of a mission in the wilderness was not initially matched by an intense religious motive in the Southern colonies, but, ironically, just as New England began to undergo the apostasy of secularization, the South was reshaped by a powerful wave of religious revivalism. This, along with the crucial fact of slavery and the need to defend that peculiar institution against abolitionist attacks, played a dominant role in the rise of Southern nationalism, yet the centrality of politics in the antebellum period, and of a distorted sanctioning of nationalism in the period after the Civil War, obviated the possibility of an authentic imaginative literature in the South. The South's defeat in the Civil War created in the imagination of the Southern writer "a connection with history so absolute that it is the very source of his being" (*Fable* 83). It is only in the twentieth century, as writers such as Faulkner and Warren arrive at a self-conscious understanding of the Southern past, a contemplation of history rather than an absorption in it, that the region's literature enters the mainstream of world writing. In a sense, of course, history continued to serve as the major source of Faulkner's creativity, just as it was the obsession of his character, Quentin Compson, but in Faulkner's case history was subjected to a critical self-consciousness of a sort that was impossible for earlier generations of Southerners.

It is something of an irony that Simpson, who was generally regarded as a historical critic—whatever that might signify—was fundamentally antagonistic to historical consciousness. He viewed the rise of "mind," the self-consciousness of Descartes, and of "history," the dialectical consciousness of Hegel, as key elements of a cultural apostasy that had led to a modern crisis of belief. Quoting Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, Simpson emphasized that it was with Descartes that "the articulation of wonder" was displaced as the central concern of philosophy: rather, "modern philosophy since Descartes has consisted in the articulations and ramifications of doubting" (Arendt 225 ff; qtd. in

*Man of Letters* 75). In fact, morally and temperamentally, Simpson was deeply aligned with the lost culture of faith that had once offered a coherent sense of order. Both the North, with its rapid secularization and industrialization of labor, and the South, with its pastoral myth of the plantation masking a ruthless capitalist organization of labor, were opposed to this lost civilization, a static society centered on the authority of the church.

To some extent, Simpson's purposes as a critic mirrored those of Faulkner and of Thomas Hardy, both of whom were writing in response to "the almost complete displacement of a society of myth and tradition by a novel society of history and science" (*Fable* 96). Given the displacement of classical-Christian civilization, Faulkner intuited that his "moral mission" was to serve a role within a secular clerisy that comprised "a spiritualized literary authority responsible for the intellectual and spiritual well-being of the nation" (*Man of Letters* 29). As Simpson wrote, Faulkner was attempting to respond to a "desacralized world, in which all . . . has become historical" (*Fable* 102). Much the same thing could be said of Simpson, who clearly felt the loss of the sacramental and searched for some way of reordering existence, even as the public discourse of America and the rest of the developed world abandoned its traditional conception of the sacred.

Simpson was by no means a dispassionate observer of this decline of the traditional order. His writing is filled with a sense of lament for "the deep narcissism of the modern self" (*Fable* 106). Like John Randolph, the fascinating dissenter from the modern world whom Simpson discusses in an essay entitled "John Randolph and the Inwardness of History," Simpson seemed always aware of "the cost of mind's looking to itself as the model of history" (*Fable* 6). In Simpson's mind, the best exemplar of this destructive reliance on the self was Ralph Waldo Emerson, and on more than one occasion, I heard him refer to Emerson, not entirely facetiously, as "Satan." What was satanic about the Sage of Concord was his embrace of what Simpson termed the Archimedean Self: the self observing the world from the Archimedean point outside mundane reality and thus become "the omnipotent source of all knowledge" (*Man of Letters* 81). The price of this "new consciousness" was, as Simpson noted, "alienation from the world homeland of man and the community of men who make the world a homeland" (*Man of Letters* 83), and the consequences of this alienation would be felt in the

half-century and more after Emerson's death in 1882. These were decades of callous economic exploitation both at home and abroad, of urban and industrial desecration of nature, and of warfare on an unprecedented scale, and one cannot help but think that Emerson's philosophy of radical individualism had much to do with these manifestations. Within a culture that respects no traditional restraints, private ambition and desire are what shape events. Without the protection of conventional rules of conduct, the weak are at the mercy of the strong, and all are cast into a ruinous anarchy. Once the inherited order has been discredited, social intercourse declines to the level of sheer self-gratification and raw force.

Because he understood the dangers of modern individualism, Simpson was deeply committed to a mythic and religious interpretation of Western civilization, and as such he stood against the forces of unfettered capitalism, gnosticism, and abstraction that increasingly controlled modern discourse. The difficulty was that these very forces had played a crucial role in America's founding. From the beginning, America had seemed to many a hazardous experiment based in part on the radical Enlightenment discourse of rights that Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and others of their persuasion had introduced into the founding documents of the nation and that, infused with Puritan zeal, formed the core of Emerson's dangerous philosophy. As Simpson understood, the Enlightenment project to make of America the first nation created by pure "mind" unleashed unrestrained forces of self-interest and continual revolution:

Throughout our national history we have tended strongly to idealize the Republic in a Gnostic spirit. Having secularized Christian perfectionism and millennialism, we have assumed that we know the end of history; and that this is America, which is the immantization of the Christian idea of perfection. (*Dispossessed Garden* 77)

Unfortunately, the Jeffersonian experiment to found a uniquely virtuous society on rational principles was "a historic reversal of the ancient relationship of society to mind." For projectors like Jefferson, "Mind, in short, had become its own place; and in doing so had become the model not only of history but had become history itself, its source and content" (Simpson "Antebellum South" 130). In response to the Gnostic ambitions unleashed by this unique political and social experiment, Simpson shared

with Allen Tate the impulse “to subject the willful self to the authority of a culture rooted in a great moral and religious tradition” (*Fable* 115).

In its reading of literature in relation to history and its effort to understand and to privilege the role of a moralizing religious sensibility within American culture and especially within the culture of the South, Simpson’s approach certainly resembled that of Tate and of a number of distinguished American critics including Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, Walter Sullivan, and Cleanth Brooks. While Simpson did not often pronounce his opinions so decidedly, he shared Tate’s belief, as he characterized it, that “the southern man of letters must function not only” as an author in various genres but “as an eminently self-conscious interpreter and moral guardian of values of social order.” Whether these values were “to be secured through the restoration and perpetuation of the traditional Western amalgam of classical-Hebraic-Christian values” (*Fable* 19), as Tate insisted, or through a new interpretation or synthesis of this lost civilization was a matter that Simpson left open for discussion and that, I suspect, he never entirely resolved in his own thinking. Perhaps Simpson did not go so far as Tate because he feared, with Walker Percy, that the classical-Christian tradition had been so discredited that it must be fundamentally renewed or that a new source of faith must be sought, but this fact did not obviate his belief that literature must operate in some sense as the “moral guardian.” Simpson declared unambiguously that, “[i]n its broadest sense literary criticism is involved in the morality of society and culture”—a concern that, in the context of modern historical reality, must focus on “the moral relationship between literary theory and the power of the nation-state” (*Fable* 21).

Although he wrote in elegiac terms of what he viewed as the decline and fall of a great civilization, Simpson’s attitude was hardly one of resignation. Like W. B. Yeats, Simpson believed that the great classical-Christian tradition that had afforded meaning and purpose to the West for thousands of years was now in abeyance as the general culture, represented by Yeats’s errant falcon, drifted beyond hearing of cultural authority and beyond control. For the present, there could be no salvation: once a civilization has been discredited, it is beyond recovery in the form in which it had existed in the past, and for those who mourn its passing, there is only the melancholy cry of lament. In

one of the saddest and most moving passages in his criticism, Simpson wrote of modern America that

we believe in the idea but not in the fact: in the idea of the heart but not in the heart; in the idea of the flesh but not in the flesh; in the idea of the community but not in community; in the idea of responsibility for one another but not in the responsive, and thus responsible, act of sympathy; in the idea of love but not in the act of love. (*Fable* 72)

The sense of loss in this passage is palpable, and as in all of Simpson's criticism, the concern extends well beyond problems of literary achievement to the matter of human survival itself. Without love and responsibility, without heart and desire, human civilization does not exist. Lacking these moral qualities, human beings are merely animals engaged in consumption and self-gratification.

There was, of course, nothing new in this insight: Simpson was merely restating the wisdom of the ages, adapting it to his chosen field of study, yet it is remarkable that in this effort he stood almost alone among critics of his generation. Who else was there who wrote with such astuteness and such humility? Among the critics, only Lionel Trilling perhaps, and among American writers in general, only Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy. Like each of these writers, and like some in the generation of modernist writers who preceded them, Simpson mourned the loss of classical-Christian civilization, and his critical writing was undoubtedly an effort to deal with an overriding sense of *dépaysement*. The sense of exile, of what Simpson termed the condition of "the southern loneliness artist" (*Fable* 153), was very much an aspect of his own temperament. For Simpson, there always existed a burning need to illuminate the "moral meaning" of American history; there was never an easy acceptance of what he termed "the alienation of memory by history" (*Fable* 154). His consciousness of a "lost homeland," literally Jacksboro, Texas, but in reality that noble culture of reformed Protestantism and proud individualism as it existed for two centuries in the American heartland and for centuries before that in Christian Europe, accompanied him all his life.

For a critic whose work originated in the culture of his childhood and who remained close to the values of his upbringing throughout his career, it was understandable that Simpson should reflect upon his



ancestral heritage as he neared the end of his life. In fact, Lewis spent his last productive years engaged in writing that was more "personal" than what he had produced earlier. This new mode of criticism took two distinct forms: a series of essays in which he recounted the accomplishments of a number of colleagues who had also been, in many cases, close friends; and a small number of essays in which he wrote of his own background and what with undue modesty he referred to as his "own small participation in the southern self-interpretation" (*Fable* xvii). Among the commemorative essays devoted to colleagues were essays on Andrew Lytle, a writer who was "committed to a crusading vision of the American South as the last bastion against the spiritually devastating force of industrial capitalism" ("Last Agrarian" 390). As he writes of Lytle's strong moral sense and of his "understanding that the context of the natural is the supernatural" ("Last Agrarian" 401), Simpson reiterates a critique of modernity that had long concerned him. An even more intransigent opponent of modernity was Melvin E. Bradford, a scholar who, Simpson worried, may have "moved beyond rhetorical critique to political activism" ("Story of M. E. Bradford" 103).

In a brief eulogy to Eudora Welty, who was perhaps his closest contemporary if not closest in outlook among Southern writers, Simpson wrote of "how essentially different from Faulkner's is her sense of her relation to the southern culture of memory" ("Some Notes" 834). In Welty's writing, Simpson perceived a reconciliation with time and place that pointed toward the condition of postmodern Southern writers. Another essay is devoted to that other "Louis" of modern Southern letters: Simpson's contemporary, Louis D. Rubin. Simpson writes movingly of the struggle of Rubin's Jewish ancestors to establish themselves in America and to establish not only a refuge but a firm sense of identity in the American South. In "The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy," Simpson recalls the very different careers of two writers with whom he was personally quite familiar. Simpson's admiration is apparent in his description of Percy's effort at "renewing the redeeming power of the Christian vision of human existence" and in his view of Percy as perhaps the foremost "postmodern Christian artist" (116). Of Foote, Simpson understandably has less to say.

In his later writing Lewis Simpson became much interested in autobiography as a genre. The autobiographical interest is prefigured in an interview that Simpson conducted with his close friend, Charles East,

in which Simpson discusses his family heritage, childhood, education, and academic career at LSU, where he taught for forty-five years. In Baton Rouge, Simpson worked at various times in the distinguished company of Eric Voegelin, Katherine Anne Porter, Albert Erskine, Jean Stafford, and Robert Lowell. Of particular importance is Simpson's work in editing the new series of *The Southern Review*, which he co-edited with Donald Stanford from 1965 until 1987. Among other accomplishments, Simpson was among the founders of the Fellowship of Southern Writers in Chattanooga, Tennessee. What distinguished Lewis P. Simpson, however, was not so much a matter of seizing opportunities—he was never a self-promoter and seemed content to spend his years laboring away in what some might consider relative obscurity—as it was an ability to envision goodness and to create something of value where nothing existed before. It was this powerful creative imagination that he placed at the disposal of the struggle against the growing secularism and materialism of his times.

Above all, I believe, Lewis Simpson engaged in a courageous effort to defend a tradition of humanistic scholarship that resisted rigid ideological or mechanical approaches. Sensing the waywardness of my own youthful interest in poststructuralist criticism, Simpson inquired, with an engaging twinkle in his eye and yet, I now understand, with a real sense of concern, whether I was, in fact, “a card-carrying structuralist.” His assumption, I dearly hope, was that I was not. In this as in everything, however, there was civility and kindness. Simpson's light touch and self-restraint allowed others their freedom. No matter how much he disagreed with you, and no matter how compelling the ground for such disagreement, there was never a trace of incivility in Lewis's manner, yet, as in my case, he understood how destructive the tendency towards programmatic critical approaches was, and he was deeply pained by this knowledge. As he wrote of contemporary theory in “The Poetry of Criticism,” an essay which appeared as three separate parts in the *Sewanee Review* between 1986 and 1991, “more than one critic [today] appears to have become powerfully moved by a demonic angelism, equating himself fully with the poet and scarcely less fully with God” (*Fable* 131).

Simpson wrote of his critical mentor, Allen Tate, that “there was no southern writer of his generation in whom the autobiographical motive was stronger” (*Fable* 27). Much the same could be said of Simpson,

especially in the later stages of his career. "A Personal Fable," the concluding section of his last book, *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, detailed Simpson's ancestral history and his childhood in Jacksboro, Texas. For Simpson, however, autobiography was not an excuse for self-indulgence, nor was its purpose in any sense self-aggrandizing or self-promotional. Rather, it was part of his lifelong quest to understand the complex and contradictory aspects of American identity. The history of his own place, Jack County, Texas, was "a microcosmic expression of the way in which for Americans history has meant living the ironic, tragic implications of the myth of America as the redemption of the world" (*Fable* 234). The myth of a redemptive historical mission was ingrained in Simpson's own particular culture, from the family's searing memories of frontier and sectional struggle to the religious teachings of the Disciples of Christ—the denomination in which he was raised—but it was perhaps inevitable, especially in the case of such a perceptive student of American culture, that the myth would be qualified by extensive knowledge of the ironies and ambiguities of that culture. It was, as Simpson knew, a history of repeated dispossession, not only of Native Americans (one of whom was Simpson's great-great-grandmother) by Europeans, but of one tribe by another, of blacks by whites, of Mexicans by Texans, of white Southerners by Northern armies, and on and on. Yet despite this tragic record of events, Simpson finds with Robert Penn Warren an "extraordinary romance about American history," a quality of "self-sufficiency" and rich meaningfulness (Warren, qtd. in *Fable* 236).

Simpson concludes his last book on this note, or at least, almost so. The anecdote with which he actually concludes, almost as an afterthought, tells of an encounter with a group of poor, unemployed men and of his thoughtless remark to his father, questioning whether the men actually had souls. Quietly but firmly, his father corrects him, insisting that "everyone has a soul." Simpson reveals that he carried the regret for his remark with him all his life, and certainly this is attested by his lifetime of scholarship grounded in a moral sense of the dignity of each individual. It was a lesson that he learned early in life and that was itself the legacy not only of his father but of an ethical and religious culture that can be traced to the Britain and Scotland of his ancestors, and to the spirit of his Native American ancestors as well.

This cultural tradition informed every aspect of Simpson's life: as he revealed in "A Personal Fable," his childhood in a small Texas town now long lost remained for him "the center of the world" (*Fable* 217). In his wide-ranging studies of American literature from its origin to the present, his explorations in European and American philosophy, and his magisterial command of his chosen field, one detects the engaging curiosity of that small-town youth as, like William Faulkner before him, he journeyed out into the larger world of letters and yet, also like Faulkner, discovered wisdom and humanity in his own postage stamp of heartland America. The long list of Lewis Simpson's accomplishments, spanning a period of over sixty years from his appointment as an instructor of English at the University of Texas at Austin in 1944 to his selection as winner of the Louisiana Writer Award for 2005, affords ample evidence of great vigor, commitment, and intelligence. I would add that Lewis Simpson possessed an even more uncommon gift: the ability to inspire not only respect but affection and, more important, a love of virtue. This heartening ability proceeded from the depths of his belief in mankind and in a transcendent order of existence. Above all, it was the depth and courage of his faith that made Lewis P. Simpson a special person.

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